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THE MATTER OF "SOUTHERN LITERATURE"

That there should be an adequate account of what has been attempted in the way of literature at the South has been a matter of pretty general agreement. Particularly in the last ten years has this more or less general agreement become a kind of demand—a demand largely due to a widespread and genuine interest in both the present and the past South. The rapid reconstruction of the economic and industrial life of this section and the much slower yet none the less sure reconstruction of its intellectual life have created a spirit of inquiry concerning almost every phase of its history. This spirit has found expression in much discussion of social and educational conditions, in a comparatively large body of special studies, particularly in the form of magazine articles and university monographs. These latter, however, have been mainly concerned with investigations of more or less narrow fields in the economic, political, and industrial history of the South. With the notable exceptions of Trent's "Life of William Gilmore Simms" and his more recent "Southern Writers," Link's "Pioneers of Southern Literature," Baskervill's "Southern Writers" (Volumes I and II), Page's "Old South Papers," and recently Mims' "Life of Sidney Lanier," the investigation of the literary side of its history has not received the attention which it perhaps deserved.¹

This apparent failure adequately to investigate and interpret the literary side of Southern life has been due, first, to the general conviction that literature *per se* is less important than other matters; and, secondly, to the feeling that the quality and quantity of what is called pure literature at the South was, in the mass, so poor and so meagre as hardly to be worth the pains necessary to record and estimate it. However, it was inevitable that, with the general stir of interest with reference to things Southern and with the writings of that quite remarkable

¹ There should be added to this list a new volume on "Sidney Lanier" by the writer of the present paper, President Snyder, of Wofford College, which has just been published as one of a series by Eaton & Mains.—THE EDITOR.

group of men and women who have been making what is called "Southern Literature" since 1875, there should be a turning back to older writers and consideration of conditions before 1865. Besides, there was naturally another mood more sentimental in character. It was the ultra-Southern mood, if one may so express it, which insisted that the South had produced, if not really great literature, at least a literature as good as, or indeed better than, that produced elsewhere in this country, and that the reason it was not recognized was due either to ignorance or to prejudice. Such a mood of provincial and sentimental criticism was to be expected: one of the results of the war was a more or less critical attitude toward the South from the outside and a corresponding resentment among the Southern people themselves — a resentment naturally prone to exaggerate quite out of proportion anything they might regard as peculiarly their own.

Now what should be the spirit, aim, and method of any effort to record and interpret the literary history of the South? In the first place, to be worth doing it must sternly set its face against the misleading sentimentalism of section. It should have no squint or bias on this account. The simple truth of the matter is that we no longer desire to know whether Southern literature is as good as or better than that produced elsewhere. We do wish to know, however, what it really is, and we do not care to see it through the magnifying haze of sectional patriotism, nor have it excessively valued under the partisan conviction that it has hitherto been undervalued. Indeed, we have had enough and to spare of this sort of writing about the South.

Moreover, we should have reached by this time a historical perspective clear enough of things tending to blur our sense of proportion and a critical atmosphere sufficiently clarified of the haze of sectional patriotism to permit a treatment of the subject scientific in method and yet sympathetic in spirit. In no other way can we hope to get at the truth of the matter; by no other method shall we ever come to a right understanding of the distinctive character of literary effort at the South both in relation to its value as an absolute achievement and as a record of one phase of the cultural history of the Southern half of the Republic.

The emphasis of such a treatment is to be laid on literature as so much light upon the cultural and intellectual life of this section. The word "peculiar" is frequently applied to Southern life and conditions. It seems always to be the fate of the section to have had and to have its "peculiar" problems. This, however, simply means that the line of Southern development is marked by distinctly differentiating characteristics. To such a degree is this true that one may in justice speak of a *Southern* civilization in contrast with the nature of the civilization developed in other parts of the country. This is far from saying that the South was, or is, any less consciously national. It does mean, though, that its nationalism has been modified by the conditions and ideals of its growth and by that quality of temperament colored and molded by them.

Now literature, in a sense, is both a product of conditions and a record and interpretation of them. By knowing the conditions of the life of a people and the forces that controlled their growth we all the better understand the quality and character of their literature. On the other hand, working through the literature itself, we are able the more clearly to comprehend and interpret their deepest and most significant life. It is not necessary for them to have produced a really great literature; in their very failure to do so one may read perhaps the truest interpretation of the movement of their history and the forces that give it significance. A literary history of the South should, therefore, keep close to what is most characteristic in the thought, experiences and ideals of the South in every phase of its life, and should make everything it attempted in the way of writing reflect these different phases of its life.

Such a point of view and such a method of treatment give to almost all the prose written at the South whatever of value it may have. To describe, for example, as a part of Southern literature that group of writers which appeared in Virginia from 1608 to 1625—John Smith, George Percy, John Pory, Alexander Whitaker, George Sandys, and William Strachey—is merely conventional, or it is meaningless, unless the group is investigated from the standpoint of the light they throw upon

the transplantation of an Elizabethan and Stuart civilization to a new environment. To include them, therefore, in a history of Southern literature is to do so for the information, first-hand, which they give concerning the beginnings of Southern life.

In somewhat the same way a study of the historians who came a century and more later—James Blair, Hugh Jones, William Stith, and Robert Beverly, together with such sketches of manners and customs as are to be found in the writings of such men as Ebenezer Cook, John Lawson, and William Byrd of Westover,—is even more valuable. For among these are men who are native born, and by this time, 1740, much of what we understand as the peculiarly Southern form of civilization has already been established and the type of men and women produced by it already pre-determined. There is in the writings of the men mentioned sufficient material for a clear-cut, vivid presentation of the pre-Revolutionary South—a presentation in which, if it were adequately and sympathetically done, we should recognize those features of Southern life and character with which we are already familiar. We should feel, moreover, that we were fairly in the midst of the conditions that colored that life and shaped that character into what it afterwards became.

With conditions more or less fixed by 1750, the next half century would furnish to a literary historian possessing insight, a grasp of essential principles, discriminating judgment and power of vital expression, a field wonderfully inviting. This is the period of political protest and, finally, of rebellion. There is a rich material in the shape of speeches, pamphlets, and resolutions, beginning with those earliest protests against the oppression of the mother country when there was no thought of separation and concluding with the Declaration of Independence when the abiding principles of human liberty are stated once for all. It is possible that a discriminating investigation of the entire literature of the Revolution at the South would disclose two things anyway: first, the general bent of the Southern mind toward constructive political thinking; and, secondly, the beginnings of that characteristic attitude which the Southern mind afterwards took toward the relation of the States to the general government.

All this would be an introduction, but a quite necessary one, to a literary history of the South from 1812 to 1865. Within these years is that past South with which we are familiar. Indeed, its relics actually survive in persons yet living, and the thought of it is yet tender in the memory of their immediate descendants. About it hangs also the pathos of a great social and political tragedy, the pain of a recent re-adjustment, and withal that great hope which has risen like the sun of a new day out of the pity and terror of its two tragedies. Naturally, the emotionalism of this mood makes it difficult to conduct a scientific study of this period, and it may be that the time has not yet come when we can record and interpret it as it really was. However, we are in a position to determine with sufficient clearness some of the important elements in the period as related to literary production, to understand the general movement of the Southern mind in the sphere of practical politics, to grasp the essential truth in the necessary effects which the social and economic conditions had upon every phase of Southern thought, to account for the character of the writings produced, and to realize the limitations and estimate approximately the absolute achievement or failure of this section in the realm of pure literature.

We should expect, moreover, from such a treatment a vivid, clearly-defined presentation of the social, intellectual, and general cultural conditions. The sources for a study of this kind are abundant. Old newspapers, sketches and biographies of political and military leaders, State histories — each State very early found its historian — and that multitude of short-lived magazines and reviews that sprang up in almost every Southern city and even in many villages and small towns where there was, if not the reality, at least the pride of culture, would offer sufficient material for an understanding of, from a literary standpoint, the meaning of the South before 1865. If such a treatment were adequate, we should be in a position properly to appreciate the effort at literature for its own sake — in a word, why the poetry, the fiction, the humor, were just what they were.

This would lead of course to the consideration of the vari-

ous forms of literature from the standpoint of their absolute value or the lack of any value. In the first place, taking up the prose, we should discover a few orations and political writings so far saturated with the fundamental ideas of human relationship, touched with such high emotion, so wrought upon by the imagination, and expressed in such dignity of phrase as almost to lift them out of the region of practical politics into the realm of pure literature of their kind. In the next place, we should have before us at least an original type of humor, racy of the soil and recording with fidelity those phases of real character that inspired the laughter of the generations before the war. Kennedy, Longstreet, Hooper, Thompson, Baldwin, Bagby, Harris, and others have made genuine contributions to American humorous writings.

These represent those forms of writing which belong, so to speak, to the outskirts of the kingdom of literature. With regard, next, to the fiction, an adequate interpretation would bring out, first, the comparatively large number of novels written at the South and the immense vogue of some of them. Of course this would not be proving anything as to the real literary value of the fiction—that it bulked so large. It would, however, indicate the extent and nature of the interest in this particular form of literature, and would flash one more ray of light on cultural conditions. In the next place, such a study would show that almost every phase of Southern life, from the very beginning to the conclusion of the Civil War, found expression in fiction. Indeed, one could read almost the entire history of the South from Bacon's rebellion in 1676 to Lee's surrender in 1865 in novels written by Southern men and women. And this makes an adequate interpretation and a just appreciation of them really worth while. Finally, a discriminating critic would be able to select out of the host of more or less indifferent writers at least three men who could tell a story well—William Gilmore Simms, John Pendleton Kennedy and John Esten Cooke—and one man of genius, though in a narrow field, Edgar Allan Poe.

The right sort of investigation of the poetic output of the South before 1865 would bring out some quite interesting things

with reference to literary conditions: first, it would show the significance of a lack of a professional class of men of letters — men who had the courage and call of genius to a sufficient degree to give themselves wholly to literature; the consequent amateurishness of almost all Southern verse; the fatal inhospitality of the poets to the great creative ideas then current in the thought of the world, and its effects in the way of a general poverty of thought and superficiality of emotion; and, finally, a defect of originality, which, combined with the above mentioned defects, gives an impression of level sameness to the music of almost the entire Southern choir. On the positive side, the catholic critic would find here and there single poems of great lyric grace and beauty and genuine charm of sentiment. So far is this true that it is really possible to gather from the Southern poets an anthology of lyric verse which would be a real contribution to American literature, particularly on the side of its lighter verse. And when that naturally lyric temperament of the South is set on fire by the passion of war, we should be able to bring together perhaps the best collection of martial poetry produced on this continent. Then, from a study of such occasional verse, the historian would turn to a full consideration of the poetry of such men as Pike, Ticknor, Hayne, and Timrod, not only for what they actually achieved but also for what they stand for as typical men of the Old South trying to express what of poetic temperament they had under conditions unfriendly and hard to overcome.

These considerations with reference to the general matter of Southern Literature have been suggested by the recent appearance of two related books — the one representing an attempt to investigate the whole field on a somewhat large scale, the other treating of a few phases of the subject. It would be too much to say, however, that the recent "History of Southern Literature,"² by Mr. Carl Holliday meets all these conditions and measures up to the ideal here set forth. It is, however, as far as we know, the first serious attempt to do so,

²A HISTORY OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE. By Carl Holliday, M.A. The Neale Publishing Company, New York and Washington.

and deserves commendation for this, if for nothing else. One feels that it lacks grasp and insight at times; that the same thing is said too often; that it is frequently over-emphatic where no emphasis is due; that the light which literature might throw on the development of Southern life and conditions is wanting; that it fails properly to use the impressiveness and significance of typical men; that it is not discriminating enough in estimating values and assigning positions; that the style of the book shows a want of firmness, of clearness, of vividness, and is too often not merely amateurish but newspaperish, if one may so speak. Still, withal, while it is far from being the final word on the subject, it is a welcome book, and one can get a fairly good idea of the meaning of the phrase "Southern Literature" from it.

The other volume related to this subject may also be named. Under the suggestive title of "The Holy Grail"³ President J. A. B. Scherer, of Newberry College, has brought together a group of six essays and addresses. While they treat apparently of widely different subjects — The Holy Grail, Henry Timrod, Sidney Lanier, The Crusaders, Liberty and Law, The Century in Literature — yet the unity of the general theme suggested by the title is felt running through them all and binding them together.

This general theme is a plea for, or rather almost a series of sermons on, the beauty of spiritual idealism and service. It is based upon the legend of Sir Percivale and the Fisher King in the Arthurian romance. With this story as a text the author brings to the young doctors of the Charleston College an inspiring message on the power of the ideal to save their profession from its hard materialistic tendencies. It runs through his interpretation of Timrod's sadly pathetic quest to realize an ideal of beauty in the midst of bitterly baffling conditions and experiences, and of Sidney Lanier's passionate aspiration toward the heights of spiritual vision. The Grail, as the symbol of the transformed Cross, is from President Scherer's standpoint that

³THE HOLY GRAIL. By James A. B. Scherer, LL.D. J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia and London.

which lies at the heart of the Crusades, giving to this hugely tragic movement its deepest moral meaning and touching its ugliness with the beauty of spiritual idealism. Finally, out of the doubt and gloom of the nineteenth century it is Browning who sees the Grail unveiled.

It will be seen that the title, while an apparently fanciful one, in reality appropriately describes the thought of the volume. This thought, the beauty of spiritual idealism and service, is developed with force and charm, and while confessedly didactic in purpose, the book is never oppressively so. The originality of the treatment and the fresh, incisive, personal quality of the style make it a readable and suggestive volume.

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